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W RIFLEMAN BROWN CAME TO VALHALLA

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How Rifleman Brown Came to Valhalla

By GILBERT FRANKAU

To the lower Hall of Valhalla, to the heroes of no renown,
Relieved from his spell at the listening-post, came Rifle-
man Joseph Brown.

With never a rent in his khaki, nor smear of blood on his
face,

He flung his pack from his shoulders and made for an
empty place.

The Killer-men of Valhalla looked up from the banquet
board

At the unfouled breech of his rifle, at the unfleshed point
of his sword,

And the unsung dead of the trenches, the kings who
have never a crown,

Demanded his pass to Valhalla from Rifleman Joseph
Brown.

"Who comes, unhit, to the party?" A one-legged Cor-
poral spoke,

And the gashed heads nodded approval through the rings
of the Endless Smoke.

*"Who comes for the beer and the Woodbines of the never-
closed Canteen*

*With the barrack shine on his bayonet and a full-charged
magazine?"*

Then Rifleman Brown looked round him at the nameless
men of The Line,
At the wounds of the shell and the bullet, at the burns of
the bomb and the mine;
At the khaki, virgin of medals but crimson-clotted of
blood;
At the ankle-boots and the puttees caked stiff with the
Flanders mud;
At the myriad short Lee-Enfields that crowded the rifle
rack,
Each with its blade to the sword-boss brown and its
muzzle powder-black.
And Rifleman Brown said never a word, but he felt in
the soul of his soul
His right to the beer of the lower Hall though he came
to drink of it whole;
His right to the fags of the free Canteen, to a seat at
the banquet board,
Though he came to the men who had killed their man with
an unfleshed point to his sword.
*"Who speaks for the stranger rifleman, O boys of the
free Canteen?
Who passes the chap with the unmaimed limbs and the
kit that is far too clean?"*
The gashed heads eyed him above their beers, the gashed
lips sucked at their smoke;
There were three at the board of his own platoon, but not
a man of them spoke.
His mouth was mad for the tankard froth and the biting
whiff of a fag,

But he knew that he might not speak for himself to the
dead men who do not brag.

A gun butt crashed on the portals, a man came staggering
in;

His head was cleft with a great red wound from the
temple bone to the chin,

His blade was dyed to the bayonet boss with the clots
that were scarcely dry,

And he cried to the men who had killed their man, "Who
passes the rifleman? I!

By the four I slew and the shell I stopped, if my feet be
not too late,

I speak the word for Rifleman Brown that a chap may
speak for his mate!"

The dead of lower Valhalla, the heroes of dumb renown,
They pricked up their ears to a tale of the earth as they
set their tankards down.

"We were both on sentry this morning, when the General
happened along.

He asked us our job in a gas attack. Joe told him, 'Beat
on the gong.'

'What else?'

'Nothing else, sir,' Joe answered.

'Good God, man,' our General said,

'By the time you'd beaten that bloodstained gong the
chances are you'd be dead.

You'd put on your gas helmet, blast you, and you'd damn
well put it on *first!*'

And Joe stood dumb to attention, and wondered why he'd
been cursed."

The gashed heads turned to the Rifleman, and now it
seemed that they knew
Why the face that had never a smear of blood was stained
to the jawbones blue.
"It was black to-night in the trenches." The scarred heads
craned to the voice,
As the man with the blood-red bayonet spoke up for the
mate of his choice.
"You know what it's like in the listening-post, with the
very candles aflame,
Their bullets smacking the sandbags, our Vickers comb-
ing your hair;
How your ears and your eyes get jumpy, till each known
tuft that you scan
Moves and crawls in the shadows till you'd almost swear
it was man.
You know how you peer and snuff at the night when the
Northeast gas winds blow."
"By the One who made us and maimed us," quoth lower
Valhalla, *"we know!"*
"He was forty yards from the Bosches when, sudden as
Hell, there came
The crash of a dozen machine guns, the orange spurts of
their flame,
And Joe stood up in the whistling spray to try and fathom
their game.
Sudden their guns cease firing, sudden his nostrils sniff
The sickening reek of the rotten pears, the death that
kills with a whiff.

Sniffs, and spots what their game is, and bangs on his
cartridge case,
With the gas cloud's teeth in his windpipe and the gas
cloud's claws on his face.
We heard his gong in our dugout—he only whacked on
it twice—
We whipped our gas bags over our heads and tucked
them down in a trice.
For the gas would have got us as sure as God if he'd taken
the Staff's advice!"
His head was cleft with a great red wound from the
chin to the temple bone,
But his voice was as clear as a sounding gong, "I'll be
damned if I'll drink alone,
Not even in lower Valhalla! Is he free of the free Can-
teen,
My mate who comes with the unfleshed point and the full-
charged magazine?"
The gashed heads rose at the Rifleman o'er the rings of
the Endless Smoke,
And loud as the roar of a thousand guns Valhalla's answer
broke,
And loud as the crash of a thousand shells their tankards
clashed on the board:
*"He is free of the mess of the Killer-men, your mate of
the unfleshed sword,
For we know the worth of the thing he did, as we know
the speed of the death
Which catches its man by the back of the throat and gives
him water for breath;*

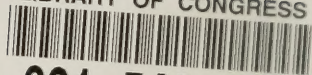


*As we know how the hand at the helmet cloth may carry
seconds too long,
When the very life of the front-line trench is staked on
the beat of a gong.
By the four you slew, by the case he smote, by the red gas
cloud and the green,
We pass your mate for the Endless Smoke and the beer
of the free Canteen."*
In the lower hall of Valhalla, with the heroes of no re-
nown,
With our nameless dead of the Marne and the Aisne, of
Mons and of Wipers town,
With the men who killed ere they died for us, sits Rifle-
man Joseph Brown.

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